USACE DISTRICT COMMANDERS

By Lieutenant Colonel Laurence M. Farrell and Ms. Julie E. Melow

As Lieutenant Colonel Smith sipped his morning coffee and prepared for classes at the United States Army War College, he suddenly felt a variety of emotions. Checking the United States Army Human Resources Command website, he saw his name as a command selectee on the Strategic Support list. "Strategic Support" meant command in the United States Army Corps of Engineers (USACE), and although he had extensive service in tactical and nontactical positions, he had never served there. He knew little about USACE, but in a few months he would take command and lead a billion-dollar organization of almost 1,000 civilians, focusing on construction projects in several states. His thought was, "How can I lead an organization I know so little about?"

Given the current force structure and operational assignments, many officers' first assignment in USACE occurs at the commander or deputy commander level. Currently, USACE has 45 districts, each with commander and deputy commander positions. Nine districts are commanded by a lieutenant colonel and 36 are commanded by a colonel. In addition, there are nine USACE divisions commanded by a general officer, each with a colonel deputy commanding general position. This force structure yields a demand of 99 officers, mostly at the lieutenant colonel and colonel grades. Many officers successfully complete battalion command and then are selected for a colonel-level command slot in a USACE district, or successfully complete an assignment as an operations and training or executive officer and then are sent to a USACE district as a senior major or junior lieutenant colonel.

Training Plan Needed

Serving successfully as the commander or deputy commander with no prior experience in the USACE organization is a challenging and arduous experience. This is true for any organization. To be successful under these conditions requires a dedicated training plan that reinforces the USACE Campaign Plan to develop and retain a highly skilled workforce. The purpose of this article is to provide a certification recommendation and self-development training plan that can be tailored to a specific district and implemented with few resources and minimal time and provide the new



Construction on this California project, the San Ramon Recycled Water Pipeline and Pump Station, required solid understanding of construction scheduling to accommodate the city's changing traffic requirements.

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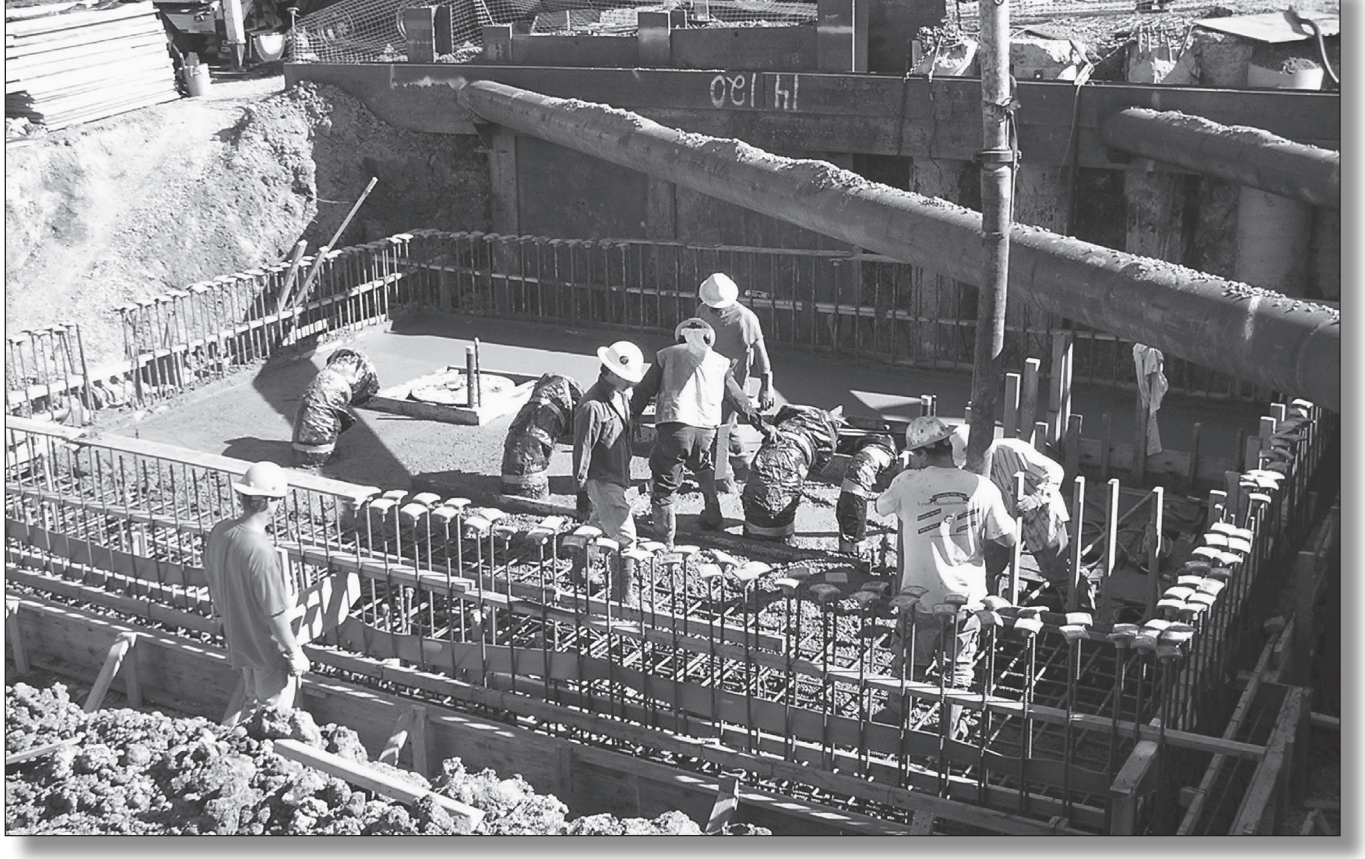


commander increased credibility and skills within the first six months of command. This recommendation includes project management certification and a way of quickly ascertaining which courses hold the most benefit to the commander and attending those courses as soon as possible. This allows USACE, the Army, and the individual to achieve the most successful command.

Ironically, many officers discount the technical component of district command in USACE, one of the Army's most technical organizations. Many new commanders say their assignment is to "provide leadership and organizational management." Though this statement is accurate, it does not negate the technical requirements of district command. For example, would an artillery officer at the battalion or brigade level ever tell the maneuver commander that the technical requirements of field artillery were not part of his duty description? Of course not. A successful field artillery battalion commander must have a basic knowledge of field artillery. The same principle is also true for a USACE command. District commanders must understand certain technical components within their respective districts and this is why, even at the battalion and brigade levels, commanders are chosen by branch. The Army fully realizes that even at the colonel level, technical competency matters.

The Army also understands that as officers rise in grade to general officer level, the technical requirements at each position decrease. This is why general officers do not wear branch insignia on the Army service uniform and are assigned and managed by an Armywide organization, the General Officer Management Office. Even the title of general means generalist—one who does not specialize in a particular function.

New district commanders have the foundations for a successful command. No one expects the commander to be a trained engineer. Not only is that an unrealistic goal, it is completely unnecessary. Each district has a large component of trained professional engineers who meet the technical requirements of the district. Providing leadership to the organization through influencing, operating, and assessing is the most important aspect of command. The leadership and management requirements of district command are similar to any other command. The Army's required schooling, such as the Engineer Basic Officer Leader Course, Engineer Captains Career Course, and the United States Army Command and General Staff College provide an extensive background in construction management that meet the day-to-day requirements of district command. By the time most officers are lieutenant colonels,



The San Ramon project required contract modifications to accommodate unforeseen geotechnical conditions.

they have a graduate degree that reinforces their engineering and/or management skills. Again, this adds to the commander's skill set when leading a USACE district. Finally, the two required USACE precommand courses (PCCs), held immediately before and approximately 90 days after taking command, are almost three weeks long. They provide an extensive background in USACE missions, operations, and functions. The takeaway products and binders from these two courses provide substantial reference material for the new commander. (Unlike other PCCs, deputy commanders are welcome to attend the USACE course and often do so.) All of these set the foundation, but if the true goal is to be great, more training is required.

The USACE Campaign Plan (page 31) asks what we will do to make USACE great, and Goal 4 is to "build and cultivate a competent, disciplined, and resilient team equipped to deliver high-quality solutions." Implementing this recommendation reinforces behavior expected of the workforce in a learning organization. The Project Management Business Process is the guide to the USACE method of operating and is defined in Engineering Regulation 5-1-11, *Program and Project Management*. Clearly, project management is a key component in making USACE great. To be effective, a new commander needs a firm understanding of, and adequate training in, the technical requirements of project management and the technical aspects of the district's core functions.

Understanding, Training Needed

A new commander, to be effective, requires a firm understanding and adequate training in the basic technical requirements in project management and the technical aspects of the district's core functions.

Project Management. Most of a district commander's time and effort focus on projects—civil works such as levees, dams, and locks; or military construction such as barracks, day care facilities, and battalion headquarters. Project management is different from construction management in that it focuses on the entire project's life cycle from planning, scheduling, budgeting, contracting, construction and, finally, to closeout. Construction management is a subset of project management. Fully understanding the project management process is essential to being a successful commander. Not only is USACE a project-based organization, but understanding the project management process allows more appropriate shifting of resources when required. Previous Army training for new commanders focused on construction management, not project management. Fortunately, project management is a relatively defined skill set and there are many one-week training courses that train and reinforce a person's understanding of it. Many of the district commander's teammates have attended these courses and obtained the Project Management Professional (PMP) certification. (USACE formally encourages its project managers to obtain this certification.) It is provided and administered by the Project Management Institute and certifies that an individual has the basic skills to be a project manager. Like many others, this certification has review books to help people study. The process of certification enhances knowledge of project management and helps the commander become a better leader. Having a certification and the skills it encompasses brings credibility to the USACE organization, the Army, and the individual. Finally, maintaining certification also reduces the potential for inefficiency, ineffectiveness, and embar-

rassment. The following website provides information on the Project Management Institute and the certification process: <*http://www.pmi.org/CareerDevelopment/Pages/AboutCredentialsPMP.aspx.*>.

District Core Functions. Thoroughly understanding a district's primary functions, core missions, and primary funding streams is the most unique and challenging aspect of serving as a district commander. USACE, unlike other Army organizations, derives its funding from managing projects. Simply stated, more projects equal more funding and more capacity. Different projects are also funded through different authorizations and appropriations. Adding to this complexity, each district is different and even districts within the same division can have widely divergent missions.

For example, in the South Pacific Division, the San Francisco District is a civil works-only district focusing on navigation, recreation, and regulatory functions. The Los Angeles District and the Albuquerque District focus primarily on military construction, while the Sacramento District has both extensive civil works and military construction missions. Even districts that appear to have similar missions may have different organizational structures due to "Centers of Excellence" located within them. Understanding a district's core mission also allows the commander to better communicate with each project's local or federal sponsor. Commanders in USACE routinely interface and communicate directly with public citizens and local, state, and federal officials, to include members of Congress. These individuals often have direct and pointed questions concerning projects in the district that affect their constituents. It is essential for a new district commander to quickly assess the business lines that provide the district with the most funding and with the most public interaction. Once a commander determines the primary business lines, simply enrolling in an appropriate USACE resident training course ensures more than fundamental knowledge in the proper arenas.

With more than 39,000 civil servants and an annual attrition of more than 5,000 people per year, USACE has a voracious annual requirement to recruit, train, professionally develop, and retain qualified personnel. This training and professional development is primarily conducted in-house by the USACE Engineering and Support Center, Huntsville, Alabama, in the Proponent-Sponsored Engineer Corps Training (PROSPECT) Program. USACE annually offers hundreds of courses in areas tailored to cultivate and synchronize with the organization to make them efficient, concise, and accessible. These courses are described in detail in the USACE Purple Book at <*http://pdsc.usace.army.mil/downloads/PurpleBook2010.pdf*>.

Once a commander determines and confirms his own "training requirements" with the district's subject matter experts, the next step is to register for the courses and attend the training. Setting the example in support of training encourages individual growth, which establishes a foundation for finding solutions to the stakeholder needs identified in the USACE Campaign Plan. Though these courses do not make the student an expert, they provide an increased level of knowledge and enable the commander to ask the proper questions at the appropriate time.

Summary

Serving as a district commander or deputy district commander is an exciting, challenging experience. The Army's traditional career path provides officers with the skills required to be successful, but more can be achieved to obtain excellence. Officers assigned to USACE are especially knowledgeable in leadership, management, and construction management; however, most of them have limited project management experience. The fact that each district is unique adds to command complexities. To be successful, officers should create a self-development training plan that quickly hones their project management skills by obtaining PMP certification, then determine the critical business lines that fund and affect their district so they can become more technically proficient in those business lines. This certification and training plan should be completed in the first six months of command, giving the commander sufficient time to lead and guide the district with his or her newfound skills. This flexible training plan will provide the new commander with a strong launching pad to more efficiently allocate resources, earn respect from stakeholders, and reduce command risk by obtaining greatness.

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